

# The Routledge Handbook of Hazards and Disaster Risk Reduction

*Edited by Wisner B., Gaillard JC, Kelman I., 2012*

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**Reviewed by Arnaud Mangematin**

**UNISDR, intern**

a.mangematin@gmail.com

*The Handbook of Hazards and Disaster Risk Reduction* [<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415590655/>] is a collaboration of 82 authors: all academics, field practitioners or institutional workers interested in disaster risk reduction. The outstanding quality of the work of these specialists, gathered under the direction of three passionate editors, is evident.

“One typical reader we have in mind is the specialist in one topic who wishes to get up to speed with the rudiments of the disciplines of teammates from other fields” (p. 5). This is exactly how this work should be recommended. Accessible to anyone searching for a holistic view of disaster knowledge, it presents the physical nature of hazards and social construction of disaster.

The wide range of topics treated should not suggest that the research behind each chapter is anything but deep and well documented. Most of the 65 chapters offer a critical look at the current state of play fed by practical examples. For instance, in the case of John Gaveta's ‘power cube’ (Chap. 5) a very theoretical approach of disaster and power was helpfully unraveled with an accompanying explanatory illustration.

Each chapter is independent of the others, and can be read separately according to the reader's personal interest. At the same time there are strong central themes that link all the chapters together. For example, each chapter touches on ordinary people's perception of hazards and local knowledge, even those chapters that deal with physical and biological hazards. Though there is some repetition, it is there to reinforce these main themes. There is a strong organising principle at work that clusters chapters into ‘big picture’ sections at the scale of nations and geological time and other groups that deal with ‘fine detail’ at the scale of households and communities. The work benefits from the encyclopedic knowledge and experience of its editors which allowed them to guide the books authors.

Even though the whole handbook deserves close attention, the reviewer will pick only few ideas for the reader from the volume's 880 pages.

All through the work, great care is taken to present disasters not as the result of a hazard but overall of social vulnerability and a low coping capacity. Disasters are a failure of development, not ‘acts of God’. The editors prefer the term *capacity* over the more trendy word, *resilience*, and are generally skeptical about terms in development discourse that distance the reader from people’s lives and livelihoods: some abstraction called ‘sustainable development’. At one point there is a list of vulnerable groups of people according to their level of ability and disabilities, gender, sexuality, age, caste, ethnicity and religious affiliation (Chapters 7, and 34 to 38). Vulnerability is shown to be a fundamental factor in the creation of disasters that is deeply rooted in political, social, economic and environmental processes in societies.

Hazards are categorized as hydro-meteorological/ climatological, geophysical, biological/ ecological and astronomical. The current scientific understanding of these natural and physical processes and events are explained with little or no specialist jargon, and one is never far from the concrete meaning as these impact human lives and assets. For example, since many big cities are situated in coastal areas (Chap. 18, 19), and confront storms and climate change, both short term risk reduction and longer term adaptation to climate change are necessary. Yet it is difficult to bring all the stakeholders together to make this happen. Disaster risk reduction (DRR) should be dealt with through multi-stakeholder coordination (Chap. 50, 51, 52), and that is not as easy as it sounds. Again stressing the bridging of scientific disciplines and administrative silos, knowledge for earthquake risk reduction is shown to be based on the complementarity of physical and social sciences (Chap. 26). The importance of life long education for disaster reduction comes up often in this book (e.g. Chap. 62). Education can come packaged in many forms, for example in music and songs (Chap. 12).

A main theme in this book is that disaster reduction requires a balance of bottom-up action based on local knowledge and top-down measures. The system of bottom-up actions for DRR was already recommended in the Yokohama Plan of Action; and this is not the only place where the editors mention the UN system approach to DRR. The Hyogo Framework for Action is mentioned many times, albeit usually critically. On the urban side, *The Routledge Handbook* cites favourably the UNISDR's Making Cities Resilient: ‘My city is getting ready!’ Campaign focused on local governments. The campaign, whose ‘10 Essentials’ are quoted in chapter 52, is aimed at involving local governments and communities in process of hazard, vulnerability and capacity assessment and action planning.

The concept paper produced for the UNISDR’s Global Platform 2013 states that before the conference attention should be given to academic and scientific networks since they are well poised to help steer and guide an ongoing dialogue on linking risk assessment, DRR methodologies and new technological developments. This book is precisely the product of one such scientific network. However, this book should not be recommended

only to UNISDR officials and those who attend the Global Platform conferences, but to a very large range of people. It is not just another big book about disaster risk reduction. It integrates ideas of sustainable development and analyses the social construction of vulnerability to disasters. Without claiming to be exhaustive it is nevertheless far ranging. Cross-referencing by the editors underscores a central theme: that everything is interrelated in when it comes to disaster risk reduction. The book provides a solid basis for further research, delivering a very large bibliography and common sense framework.